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Mormons caught up in wave of pedophile accusations/ Church deals with abuse cases without reporting them, critics say

By PAUL MCKAY
Staff

The church that is known for placing a spiritual premium on family values is under increasing attack for an alleged failure to protect its children from pedophiles.

Therein lies the irony of a barrage of lawsuits and general complaints alleging that - in an effort to protect its wholesome image - the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly called the Mormon Church, has failed to root out child molesters in its midst.

The fast-growing institution, with 10 million members worldwide, is not the only church that has been plagued in recent years by embarrassing cases involving sexual abuse of children. But while Mormon officials maintain that they have eliminated most of the problems that may have once existed, lawsuits and criminal charges linking the church to pedophiles have continued to mount. For example:

Last year in Montgomery County, a jury found the national church liable in a \$4 million verdict - \$1 million more than the plaintiff had sought - for failing to protect an 8-year-old boy who was sexually assaulted in 1993.

The pedophile, Charles M. "Chuck" Blome, who already had been convicted of criminal charges and sentenced to prison before the lawsuit trial, was active in the Magnolia ward that the child and his mother attended. (Local congregations in the Mormon faith are called wards.)

The church is appealing that verdict and is fighting other, similar lawsuits in which Mormon representatives are accused of shunning young victims or, in some cases, even blaming them.

In Beckley, W.Va., a woman whose two children were sexually abused by her ex-husband, a Mormon, maintains in a \$750 million lawsuit that representatives of his church could have stopped the abuse when they first became aware of it, five years before his arrest. The man is now in prison. That case, being watched by lawyers across the country who have similar lawsuits pending against the church, is scheduled for trial in October.

Officials at the church's home base in Salt Lake City admit they were embarrassed in late March when a group of Mormon leaders in Utah helped a convicted child molester gain early release from prison so he could go on a church mission to Chile. High-ranking church officials intervened to withdraw the mission, but the man remains free.

Despite those and scores of other cases, Salt Lake City lawyer Von G. Keetch contends that the real irony of attacks on the church lies in the very progress it has made in combating sexual child abuse.

Exaggerated allegations, high-dollar demands

Keetch, a Mormon affiliated with the firm that defends the church in lawsuits involving such cases, insists that the church is at the forefront among religious and social institutions in dealing with victims and their molesters. He says allegations in the lawsuits usually are exaggerated or manipulated by lawyers who are more concerned with cashing in on high-dollar demands than with the best interests of their young clients.

Keetch says the church will not stand still for lawsuits such as the one in West Virginia, which he cites as an example of such gold-digging.

The case is among a litany of accusations that local Mormon leaders violated laws and ignored church policies in not reporting a known pedophile to police.

"That's the kind of cases we see," Keetch said. "Those are the kinds of cases where we're not talking anymore about getting the victims the kind of help they need to get whole again, and what they may be entitled to - not just for counseling, but for general damages, as well, for pain and suffering. We're talking about plaintiffs' counsels who seem to believe that this (church) is their retirement plan or this is their gold at the end of the rainbow. Those kinds of cases, the church is going to aggressively defend to its last breath."

The church has never officially disclosed its financial records, but published estimates have put its wealth at \$5 billion or more - an amount the church calls exaggerated. Still, the Mormon Church's vast holdings include investments in stocks, real estate and businesses, including the largest resort in Hawaii.

Much of the criticism comes from disenchanted members or former members, Keetch said, who never seem satisfied with any progress or changes the church makes in response to sexual child abuse - a problem, he noted, that infiltrates all churches and all segments of society.

"We get criticized for what we do and criticized for what we don't do."

Keetch said the critics apparently don't know or don't care what the church has done to emerge as a leading force in the battle against child molestation - a plague that has cost the Roman Catholic Church millions of dollars in punishing verdicts.

Keetch said the lawsuits against the Mormon institution cannot be compared to the highly publicized ones alleging offenses by Catholic priests. The lawsuits against the Mormon church are different in that they attempt to blame the sexual crimes of church members on clergy who did not participate in the abuse, he said.

Despite allegations that the clergy were parties to the abuse by not reporting and by generally protecting confessed molesters, Keetch said that in most cases - including the West Virginia case - the church was under no legal obligations to report abuse.

While acknowledging that "some clergy have made mistakes," going too far in helping perpetrators by testifying as character witnesses for them, Keetch said state laws that address the confidentiality of confessions to clergy vary widely.

Harold Brown, director of the Mormon Church's global network of welfare services, points out that a

pedophile is often a charmer who can win the confidence of parents and caretakers before taking advantage of a child. It seems that critics expect church leaders to somehow be able to see through the deception, he said.

"These people fool a lot of people," Brown said. "A person who abuses is always a deceiver, always a liar."

Brown, who acknowledges that, at best, pedophilia can be managed but seldom "cured," said the church's accusers don't seem to understand or appreciate the high value that Mormons place on women and children.

"We have nothing to gain by having abuse in the church," said Brown, who oversees a church network that provides many kinds of professional counseling in 65 cities. "Our children, our women, our families are especially precious to us."

Terry Jennings, a Mormon who prosecutes accused child molesters in Maricopa County, Ariz. - a Mormon stronghold - said the perception, if not the reality, that child sexual abuse is more common in the Mormon Church may be because those of the faith tend to have large families.

The family is considered so sacred in the church, Jennings said, that Mormons believe families literally will live together in eternity. That may be one reason that some bishops and other church leaders try to counsel known or suspected molesters in-house and fail to notify police, he said.

"I'm not trying to defend what they do, but in a lot of cases, they are trying to do everything they can to keep a family together and get the family healed so that they can live (together) in eternity."

Trying to 'cure' with counseling

But some critics say the true motive for trying to keep abuse reports quiet is the desire to preserve the church's image.

All too often, they add, the leaders try to "cure" pedophiles with counseling that relies on prayer and repentance, without professional help or police intervention.

"The church will go to great lengths to protect its image and reputation," said Clay **Dugas**, a lawyer in Orange who has sued the church on behalf of numerous child-abuse victims and their families in Texas and Mississippi.

Dugas, who led a team of lawyers in winning the \$4 million verdict in the Montgomery County case, said he believes that pedophiles are attracted to the Mormon Church because of its structure.

"A pedophile will have all kinds of opportunities to go into the homes of members or have easy access to children so he can build trust with the kids and families," **Dugas** said. "Men are empowered in the church very quickly. Females don't get that empowerment. The men have all the real authority."

"The church is very patriarchal, very secretive. Why would you preach to the membership of a church not to discuss a case of child abuse when it becomes known? They do that. The whole belief is that the men, the leaders who are all men, can take care of everything. If someone in a family is abused, the family won't go to the police. They'll go to the bishop."

Dugas has teamed with Michael G. Sullivan, a lawyer from Columbia, S.C., in finding other incidents of child abuse that they contend the church failed to report. They say they may join forces in filing more lawsuits to halt what they consider church cover-ups similar to those that went on in

the Roman Catholic Church.

Sullivan, who leads the team of plaintiff's attorneys in the Beckley, W.Va., lawsuit, said he has no idea whether pedophilia is more prevalent in the Mormon Church. Nor does he have evidence, he said, that the church attracts pedophiles.

"I do know that there is a pattern in the Mormon Church, dating back years and years, in which the church does not report cases of sexual child abuse to the police or proper authorities," he said.

Sullivan maintains that the church is trying to hide behind the veil of freedom of religion in asserting that confidential confessions to clergymen are legally protected.

"The safety of kids trumps even religion every time," he said.

Keetch, the Salt Lake City defender of the church, says the 41-year-old mother who is suing the church in the Beckley case on behalf of her son and daughter - now teen-agers - accepted financial aid and other welfare from the church even after filing the lawsuit. The children were sexually abused from 1989 until 1994 by their father, who is serving prison terms totaling 173 years.

The father first told several Mormon ward leaders and members in Beckley that he was abusing his children in 1989. Church attorneys contend, however, that he downplayed the severity of the abuse and conned those to whom he confessed, persuading them that he would never again touch the children.

Keetch speculates that the mother, who is not a Mormon, dropped the church's financial assistance on advice from Sullivan, who Keetch says was more concerned about the lawsuit than ensuring that she and her children got help. It is a further measure of Sullivan's insincerity, Keetch suggests, that he announced to the National Press Club in 1996 that he had filed the \$750 million lawsuit.

Sullivan, however, says he welcomes publicity because it is needed to force the church to change its ways.

As for ceasing church welfare to the mother, Sullivan has a sharply different recollection. He said Keetch was unwilling to have the church spend \$2,500 to have the children evaluated to determine what kind of professional therapy they needed.

"Anybody who takes on the church with a lawsuit on this kind of stuff usually gets discouraged and gives up, because the church has all those billions for lawyers like Von Keetch who will fight the victims' families every step of the way instead of just doing what's right," Sullivan said.

'Scorched-earth' legal strategy

"It's a scorched-earth legal strategy. The typical pattern, when a suit is filed, is for the church to fight right up until a jury is picked or about to be picked. And then they settle for an amount that is confidential at the courthouse steps."

The mother in the Beckley case - whose name has been withheld to protect her children's identities - says she had anticipated that she and her attorneys would be accused of greed.

That, she says, is not the motivation.

"People can believe what they want, but the church leaders in Beckley could have stopped the abuse of those kids in 1989, when my ex-husband told them he was abusing," the mother said. "They didn't do anything about it except try to help him every step of the way while he was doing horrible things

to those kids.

"(The church) did nothing to help my children. I didn't even know he had told (church leaders) that he was abusing the kids until 1994."

William Watson, a West Virginia lawyer who will defend the church in the trial, said the mother had to have known about the abuse when she was still married and living with the father in Alaska. In one case, Watson said, the boy was taken to the hospital with an injured penis.

"After that, the mom says to him, 'You take the kids to West Virginia,' " Watson said. "She sent them off to live with him. She wasn't an exemplary mom."

The woman gave up custody to the father in 1988 to pursue her military career, although she later left the Army and regained custody.

The mother, her lawyers say, will stand firm in what is sure to be a grueling trial. She insists that her only motivation is to keep other children in the church from being abused while officials look the other way.

"The only thing that's going to stop this is for (the church) to have to pay a huge amount of money," she said.

To the extent that a problem with pedophilia within Mormon ranks ever existed, Keetch said, the church largely corrected it in 1995. That's when it established a national toll-free help line that allows local church leaders to call for advice from Mormon social workers and lawyers on how to handle abuses.

At the same time, the church stepped up training about pedophilia for the bishops who supervise the 23,000 wards. Training emphasizes the need to make sure a suspected pedophile is reported - if that state's laws require it - and to ensure the victim's safety by removing him or her from the suspected abusers, Keetch said.

The victim's safety is the priority for the trained counselor who will take the call, he said.

The help line and training have been promoted by top-ranking Mormons, including church president Gordon B. Hinckley, who, along with other church leaders based in Salt Lake City, has strongly denounced child abuse in speeches dating to 1984.

But Lavina Fielding Anderson, an excommunicated Mormon who co-wrote a book documenting what she describes as widespread "ecclesiastical and spiritual abuses" by the church in cases of child abuse, said she was not surprised recently when a development in the case of convicted child molester Shonn M. Ricks made the news in Utah.

Ricks, 23, was found guilty by a Salt Lake City jury of molesting a 6-year-old girl in February 1997. Citing Ricks' severe heart condition, the judge reduced his two second-degree felony convictions to third-degree felonies, which carry a maximum sentence of five years rather than the 15 years he could have received.

Then when Ricks, a Mormon, came up for parole in a hearing last August, his friends, relatives and church leaders reportedly filled the room.

The reason: Mormon leaders contended that Ricks was sufficiently rehabilitated after less than two years in prison to receive a church "call" to a mission in Chile.

The parole board chairman, also a Mormon, pushed for the early release - which the full board later approved - and Ricks was freed over the objections of the victim's father, who also is a Mormon.

Ricks remains free, although the church scrapped the mission assignment after a high-ranking Mormon official in Salt Lake City intervened.

Church leaders declined comment but issued a written statement saying: "The church does not call convicted child sex abusers on missions. In this case, normal procedures appear not to have been followed. The call has been withdrawn."

Salt Lake City prosecutor James Cope said Ricks has never admitted his guilt and obviously has convinced friends, relatives and his local church leaders in a small northern Utah community that he is innocent.

Missions and molesters: the church's guidelines

Cope, a Mormon, noted that the church's own guidelines prohibit convicted molesters from being among the 55,000 members, between ages 19 and 26, who are called for mission assignments every year.

"The church is trying to train its local leaders not to do stuff like this, but every once in a while I still get a horrendous story like this that comes across my desk," Cope said.

"It's like the military in that there's always somebody who doesn't read the manual on how to handle the rifle, and sure enough some private comes along and shoots himself in the foot. In this particular case, somebody clearly did not follow the church's own directives in its handbook of instructions. There's always that 10 percent of ecclesiastical leaders, just like in the military, who don't bother to read the manual."

Anderson, the Salt Lake City writer and church critic whose father was a bishop for 13 years, said handbooks and guidelines for church leaders on how to handle abuse reports date back to 1985. In all too many cases, they have been ignored, she said.

"There is still this tendency, after all these years of speeches and the church putting out publications and everything else, for them to believe the perpetrator and blame the victim," she said.

"One problem with the training they talk about so highly is that men do the training," Anderson said. "Another problem is that the help line is for the bishop to call. Very often it's the bishop who's the problem."

"He'll get a report of abuse and never call the help line, never call police, never do anything but try to help the perpetrator. Men are the problem. Women are not included."

She cites the Ricks case, in which local church leaders rallied to support a known molester, as one that underscores the mindset among the male leadership.

"They want very much to believe that the perpetrator is innocent," Anderson said. "The victims and their families see this kind of thing happen and they're revictimized all over again."

The Salt Lake City Tribune reported that the father of the 6-year-old victim felt so isolated after Ricks was accused that he moved his family to another town.

Number of incidents considered relatively few

Still, Keetch says such incidents are relatively few. He said no more than about 30 lawsuits have been filed against the Mormon Church in the past 10 years alleging improprieties by clergymen.

A third of those were dismissed outright without any payments by the church, he said.

"Another 12 or 15 have been settled for what I would term less than nuisance value, which is less than it's going to cost the church to defend," Keetch said. "And about another five or six have been settled for more than what I would term to be nuisance value over the 10-year period."

Anderson said lawsuits are never filed in many cases because it takes a strong person to withstand the backlash that results from criticizing, much less suing, the church. She has documented cases in which Mormons have been excommunicated for reporting child abuse to bishops.

"Not many victims or their families are willing to take on a church that is this powerful," she said.

In 1992, Anderson was excommunicated after writing an article critical of what she calls "ecclesiastical and spiritual abuses" by Mormon leaders.

She still attends the Salt Lake City ward from which she was excommunicated, a disciplinary action that allows her to attend church but bars her from certain activities.

The development in the Ricks case notwithstanding, Keetch maintains that lawsuits and the cases cited by Anderson and other critics are aberrations in which almost all of the abuses occurred in the 1980s or early 1990s, before the church set up its national toll-free phone line and stepped up the training of bishops.

Emphasizing that "one case is too many" and granting that some bishops and stake leaders may have ignored church policies in years past, Keetch said the problem amounts to no more than "a blip here and a blip there."

The foreman of the jury that awarded the \$4 million verdict in the Montgomery County case, however, said jurors wanted to send the church a message that it does have a problem with the way it handles, or mishandles, cases of child abuse.

"We were unanimous in that we didn't feel the church had any great big conspiracy going on," said Vincent Perregrino, 39, of Spring. "But we were also unanimous that the church was negligent. We wanted to go for a big number because we felt maybe they need to start thinking about this when they hear from people who go to them and tell them there's abuse going on. You can't just sweep this stuff under the rug and act like you don't hear it."

"Besides that, we felt like (the victim) was entitled to the reimbursement."

Perregrino and several other jurors said it bothered them that a bishop testified on behalf Blome, the pedophile, in a bond-reduction hearing.

Blome's bond was reduced from \$100,000 to \$15,000 after the bishop testified. Before being convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison, Blome went back to the Magnolia ward and attended Sunday services.

While noting that he still admires much about the Mormon Church, Perregrino said he tends to agree

with those who say that there is a problem with the dominance of males in authoritative positions.

"It's like a good-old-boy system on a grand scale," he said.

Monday: A church flap over research into the sexual abuse of children.

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